

## Melting Rockets

All I really remember of her—the white-haired old lady—is her face, and the popsicles she gave each of us the last day of our classes. She took all of us outdoors that day, down to the ball field, and handed us our treat, one by one, tearing the white wrapper, sticky and red, from the popsicles. We stood beside the aluminum bleachers and sucked deliciously at our gifts. They were rocket popsicles, not just any ordinary popsicles. Red, white and blue—fat and blue at the bottom, red and pointed at the top—ready to explode from our hands and launch into space. Real treats, for I had never had one before.

The day was overcast and almost cold, not the ideal for popsicles, but we didn't mind. She was so old—so old, and white-haired. The popsicles didn't match her face, her wrinkles making smiles as she ate hers. Old. She smiled at each of us, talked some about lessons we had learned in her class, and sucked her rocket popsicle right down to the blue. I kept staring at the deep blue-gray of the sky, wondering if it would rain, and at the tired gray of the bleachers, and over at her face, and her white hair, and wondered how she knew about rocket popsicles—watching her enjoy hers along with us. I don't remember a single day of classes with her, a single lesson she taught me. I don't even remember her name. But I remember the popsicles.

We were a special class; the only ones to know the secret life of this old woman—the life that knew about these wonderful popsicles. She retired from teaching that year, and we each knew it. We knew for her it was her last day of teaching, in some young way, vague and half-formed. We knew, at least, that we were the last, and that this treat was a singular occurrence. I stared at her from under the bleachers, my popsicle staining my mouth and the white wrapper, colored and sticky, clinging to my fingers as I peeled it back for a better lick. I wondered if she was tired.

That she could know us, so far removed from her in her oldness, her dark, long clothes and wrinkles. That she could know about these wonderful rockets, and give them to us. That she would have one herself. I didn't understand “old” at all that day; I didn't understand how she went on being old, holding her popsicle rocket, and staring at that gray sky with me. She knew my name, and spoke it, and told me it was nice to have me in her class. And good-bye. She smiled, wrinkled, and moved on for me to stand in the baseball-field dirt by the aluminum bleachers and stare up at the darkening gray sky and wonder about old ladies and popsicles, and how the two could possibly have come to know each other.